THE CONSUMER COUNCIL

FURNITURE TRADE AND CONSUMER

A CONSUMER COUNCIL STUDY

July 1965

LONDON
HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
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INTRODUCTION

Buying furniture for a home is an emotional undertaking. An American psychiatric study[1] has concluded that women are most likely to have nervous breakdowns at three periods in their lives—at the change of life, post-natal depression and when furnishing a home.

Be that as it may, the style in which her home is furnished puts a woman's personal taste on public display, although this may not be a conscious factor in her choice of furniture. Furniture is relatively expensive so that for this reason, too, its choice is a serious matter, and it is an undertaking about which people may be rather easily discouraged. The public will only be encouraged to buy new furniture, either to replace old pieces or to add new pieces, if the service they get from the furniture trade embraces good design, reasonable delivery, fine workmanship and the prompt settlement of justifiable complaints. Eagerness to buy has not, therefore, been encouraged by the criticism which has in recent years been directed at the furniture industry in the United Kingdom, in particular criticism of its design consciousness.

The importance of these factors cannot be measured, but it is demonstrable that the furniture trade in the United Kingdom has been stagnant for a number of years and the replacement rate of furniture is relatively slow.

These considerations, combined with evidence that among problems about consumer goods handled by Citizens' Advice Bureaux, complaints about furniture are high in the list and are often difficult to resolve satisfactorily, led the Consumer Council to undertake a special enquiry into the furniture industry and its relations with consumers. Our terms of reference enjoin us, amongst other things, to inform ourselves about consumers' problems and about matters affecting their interests.

We therefore undertook some special surveys about consumers' experiences in buying furniture and these are described in the following chapters.

We also suggest a number of ways in which dissatisfaction with furniture purchases could be reduced. We hope that by so doing we shall encourage the furniture trade to improve its service to the public and shall also help consumers on their side to understand the problems of the industry and take them into account when they buy furniture.

The furniture covered by this study is new domestic household furniture.[2]

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[1] "Decorating the Home—A Special Neurosis in Women" by Milton R. Sapirstein in collaboration with Alis De Sola, *Harper's Magazine*, September, 1955.

[2] The survey is concerned with furniture for the ordinary domestic household, a definition which excludes furniture for offices, schools and other public institutions. It also excludes radio and television sets and other items of domestic equipment, which are manufactured in separate industries with distinct technical problems of their own. Soft furnishings—carpets, curtains, bed covers, etc.—also have no place in our survey, since they are the products of textile or carpet manufacturers. Mattresses are excluded, because this is another industry in its own right. We are left with the Board of Trade's standard industrial classification of domestic furniture, including upholstered items, which covers dining-room, kitchen (excluding built-in units), nursery, living-room and other miscellaneous items of furniture for the home.

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CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY WORK

Before embarking on the surveys, the Council wished to get a general idea of the type of things consumers were complaining about and of the type of people who had complaints to make, so we wrote a letter (See Appendix to this Chapter below) to the national and selected provincial press asking readers who had bought furniture recently to write to us describing their buying experiences, both favourable and unfavourable. The letter appeared in a representative selection of the national and provincial newspapers, in the Council's page in 'Which?', and in a large number of local consumer group bulletins, and secured a response that was larger than expected. Between June and November 1964 a regular flow of letters was received. The final tally was 972 letters of which 889 concerned furniture (according to the Council's definition) and 84 per cent of the cases detailed were unfavourable (see Chapter V for an analysis of the letters). It was to be expected that most of the letters would be about disappointments, since people are more likely to put pen to paper when they are dissatisfied, if only in the hope of getting something done about it.

The letters helped in the preparation of the questionnaires by revealing areas of complaint that could be tested in postal and interview surveys.

The letter was only intended to give the Council a rough idea of the range and nature of furniture complaints. The National Association of Retail Furnishers, however, protested to the Council in the following terms:

"We appreciate that one of the functions of the Consumer Council is to inform itself about consumers' problems and matters affecting their interests. This could have been achieved by the first and last paragraphs of your letter.

"The middle paragraph of your communication consists of a series of leading and loaded questions which in our opinion are calculated to put into the minds of readers all sorts of grounds for complaints which may never have existed. Your questions throughout contain implicit assumptions which are detrimental to the reputation of all concerned with the manufacture, distribution and sale of furniture.

"We do not believe that in protecting the interests of consumers the Council should find it necessary to damage by innuendo the interests of manufacturers and retailers. We therefore take the strongest exception to the use of this method of obtaining information about consumer problems."

The Council in its reply said that it did not think that the questions were loaded since favourable and unfavourable experiences were requested. The Council added the suggestion that suppliers who are anxious to give good service to their customers should welcome, not oppose, objective attempts to find out whether and if so why there is ground for complaint.

Chapter I Appendix

Letter sent to the Press June, 1964

Have your readers bought any furniture recently? If they have, the Consumer Council would like to hear about their buying experiences.

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Did the salesman try to make a quick sale or did he spare time for advice and guidance? Was the product delivered promptly and packaged properly? Was there anything obviously wrong with the product when it was delivered? Did faults develop soon after purchase? If faults appeared, did the dealer or manufacturer deal with them properly? Did the manufacturer honour any guarantee given? Did the terms of any such guarantee when they were applied prove to be satisfactory?

These are some of the questions to which the Consumer Council is looking for answers from your readers. They can be of great help in our investigation of shoppers' experiences when buying furniture by sending me their "hard luck" or "good luck" stories, marking the envelope "Furniture".

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CHAPTER II

THE STRUCTURE OF THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY

Economic Position

The definition of the domestic industry chosen by us must be relaxed when the industry's economic position is discussed since the available statistics classify furniture with floor coverings. Although not strictly accurate, the combined figures are useful in giving a rough picture of the relative position of domestic furniture in consumer expenditure.

Between 1948 and 1964 the proportion of total consumer spending taken up by all consumer durable goods—including furniture, motor cars, radios and electrical goods—nearly doubled, but the proportion spent on furniture and floor coverings remained fairly static. The figure never fell below 2.1 per cent, but never rose above 2.7 per cent and was 2.3 per cent in 1964 (See Table 1.)

Thus, although people are in absolute terms spending more on furniture than they have in the past, they are spending relatively far more on other consumer durables, notably cars and electrical goods. The main reason is presumably that furniture is a basic essential so that in common with other essentials like food it takes a smaller proportion of rising incomes, more of which are being spent on non-essentials. However, fashions in furniture change quite often and people do get tired of their old furniture, but the fashion characteristics of furniture do not seem to have greatly influenced people's buying habits. Studies by the Furniture Development Council have shown that the average replacement period for a three-piece suite is 19 years and for a bedroom suite every 37 years.[1].

The Manufacturing Side

Furniture manufacturers have not had the stimulus of a big growth in demand for their products like other consumer durables industries. The structure of the industry has thus changed relatively little since the war. In the main it consists of private family firms who finance expansion out of profits in good years and there has been little incentive for them to overcome the problems of expansion which small firms face. Their family managements have in general had neither the desire nor the resources to take on specialist managers in design, engineering, marketing and administration, although there are signs that more of such men are being engaged today. As for the few public companies, most of these have found difficulty in raising finance since long-term stagnation and short-term fluctuations have not given shareholders the growth prospects which they could get from other industries.

The predominant family structure of the industry and the lack of stimulus from growth in demand have inhibited concentration and the rationalisation of production and distribution. Even though, as Table 2 shows, the number

[1] An Economic Review for the Furniture Industry, November 1964, published by the Furniture Development Council.

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of firms manufacturing domestic furniture has been decreasing, having fallen by 46 per cent between 1950 and 1962, the industry is not highly concentrated by modern industrial standards. The percentage of firms with turnovers above £½m. increased from 0.8 per cent to 3 per cent and these firms increased their share of total turnover from 22 per cent to 44 per cent. In this period, total turnover increased by 20 per cent (£93.5m. to £137.7m. at current prices). (Tables 2, 3 and 4.)

Furniture is among the 221 industries which have had their concentration ratios calculated. (The concentration ratio of an industry is the percentage of net output produced by the three largest firms.) A high concentration ratio (over 67 per cent) was found in 50 of the industries; a medium concentration ratio (between 33 per cent and 67 per cent) was found in 69; and a low concentration ratio (below 33 per cent) in 102. The furniture industry has a ratio of 8 per cent.[2]

With a few exceptions, it is the large manufacturers who make branded furniture for only they can afford the advertising outlays necessary for its promotion on a national scale. These manufacturers trade freely with the small independent retailer but concentrate on the multiple shop and the large independent retail outlet. Through advertising of brand names, they help the retailer in the marketing of their product. But the majority of furniture manufacturers are too small to have the resources to advertise brand names. A typical small manufacturer will sell most of his production to a limited number of retailers with whom he has built up long-standing relationships. The retailer may commission special lines or specify modifications to others and will do the marketing of the product and frequently advertise and display it under his own name. Virtually without exception, furniture manufacturers do not sell direct to the public.

Although they have advantages not all big firms are efficient or all small firms inefficient, nor do the bigger firms necessarily produce goods that are better value for money. The furniture industry is so diverse that it would be unfair and dangerous to generalise. The range of prices for a bedroom suite for example, varies from far above £100 to well below £50 with the average mass market suite selling around £75. There will be highly efficient small firms producing for a limited high-quality and high-priced market. There will be equally small firms relying less on quality, who supply the limited market for very cheap furniture.

Size, naturally, gives scope for increased mechanisation, which can lead to greater consistency in production as well as bringing other advantages. Standards of quality control and inspection, however, vary considerably throughout the industry. Products may be regularly checked against specifications throughout the production cycle and mechanisation in some firms can make metal-work tolerances quite possible. But in other firms, relatively large for this industry, where the scale of production does not permit the application of old-style craftsmanship, modern techniques of quality control remain at an elementary stage with little testing of production models. These suppliers tend to wait for faults to show up in use.

There are a number of British Standards for the manufacturers of furniture, but support for some of these standards has declined for a variety of reasons. This is the case as regards B.S.1960, the standard concerned with domestic

[2] Op. cit. p. 31.

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furniture made mainly of wood. First, the manufacturers disliked the stipulation in the standard as to the type of materials and components to be used. They considered this irksome and restrictive. Secondly, they regarded the standard, including these restrictions, as setting too uniform and rigid a standard which, they said, tended to equate the product of the manufacturer producing for the very highest quality market with that of the manufacturer who was interested in producing furniture of a basic quality, but which only just attained the requirements of the British Standard. Thirdly, the manufacturers argued that if there were an inherent value in compliance with British Standards the consumer certainly did not know what it was, because of a failure of publicity, and a certificate of compliance was not, therefore, a selling point. The retailers strongly supported this last view.

The British Standards Institution maintain, however, that a great deal of B.S.1960, including the tests in it devised by the Research and Information Committee of the Furniture Development Council (now F.I.R.A.), provided protection to the purchaser as to the strength and durability of the article; acknowledgements of its value have been given by manufacturers, and the tests are known to have been used privately by many of them. The standard, therefore, served the purchaser by providing specifications for certain hidden aspects which he could not easily test for himself.

B.S.I. are now working on a complete revision of the standards for domestic furniture in order to produce a standard that deals with the basic qualities of strength and stability only. Compliance with such a standard should reduce complaints arising from constructional faults. The scheme cannot succeed, however good the standard, unless manufacturers and retailers are prepared to make good use of it and unless there is publicity to make consumers aware that the Kite Mark (which indicates that the product is made to the British Standard) represents an independent assurance that the furniture is satisfactory in these basic attributes. All the other aspects of furniture that the consumer needs to know about can be, and it is hoped will be, dealt with through the Consumer Council informative labelling scheme (See Chapter VIII).

Some 80 per cent of moquette fabrics used for upholstery in Britain are imported, mainly from Belgium as is a similar percentage of tapestry. Action on standards for upholstery fabrics is not, therefore, of great effect if it applies solely to British fabric manufacturers, who tend to produce for the more expensive, higher quality end of the market. The publication of B.S.2543, the British Standard for woven upholstery fabrics, was followed by the publication by the Belgian exporters' association of a minimum standard for cloths for the British market, which was almost an exact copy. The standard, although somewhat narrow in scope, has improved the quality of fabrics to a certain extent, being used as a reference point although not invoked directly very often. But it has been considered to be deficient in a number of ways by some people. In particular, it contains no wear tests, and the light fastness requirement is regarded as too low. The B.S.I. Committee on this subject is considering what sort of new approach there should be to standards for upholstery fabrics and hopes to produce standard methods of measuring performance to be used in the Consumer Council's labelling scheme (See Chapter VIII). The Furniture Industry Research Association intends to take on an expert to conduct research into testing methods for upholstery fabrics, since there is not, as yet, general agreement on the reliability or interpretation of tests.

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The Retailing Side

Retailers, except where the item is a nationally advertised brand, do not as a rule use manufacturers' names as selling points, because few furniture manufacturers are well known to the public. The names of the big furniture stores both in London and in the provinces are far better known and this is one reason why some well-known retailers substitute their own brand names for those of the manufacturers. The retailers say that furniture is sold on their reputation and not on that of the manufacturers.

Just as a typical small manufacturer supplies a limited number of retailers, so a retailer takes his furniture supplies from relatively few manufacturers with whom he builds up long-standing relationships. Although the manufacturers will initiate the design of new lines, the retailer is the dominant partner in this relationship, since he effectively has the last word in what is produced. If the new line does not fit a particular price bracket, which the retailer finds to be most profitable, the manufacturer may have to adapt the design to fit the price at which the retailer wishes to sell.

Retailers do not carry large stocks or a wide range of samples because of the expense of maintaining large storage areas, the difficulty of forecasting changes in demand and, they say, because however large their stocks, customers would always want something different. They feel that the customer is prepared to wait six or seven weeks for the furniture he has ordered to be delivered rather than pay the increased mark-up necessary to cover the cost of carrying stocks.

Some chains of shops operating in the cheaper end of the market are exceptions to this general rule in that they sell from stock. They deal with manufacturers who mass produce cheap furniture. Furniture is delivered to, and stored in, a central warehouse owned by the retailer from which deliveries to customers are made. The process necessarily limits choice, but makes furniture readily available and eases delivery delays. This practice of selling from stock and using a central warehouse shows few signs of spreading to the rest of the trade.

Trade Organisations

On the manufacturing side, the British Furniture Manufacturers' Federated Associations (B.F.M.), a federation comprising 11 regional manufacturer associations and the national Associations of Folding Furniture Makers and Cane and Willow Furniture Makers, represents the makers of 95 per cent of all furniture. Besides providing the normal trade association services, it has produced a care label for upholstery, and has asked for legislation to make it compulsory for furniture to be marked with the maker's name.

The Branded Furniture Socicty, which has 21 members including some bedding manufacturers, was formed in 1959 by the main manufacturers of branded furniture in order to promote their brands and ensure consumer satisfaction.

On the retail side, the National Association of Retail Furnishers (N.A.R.F.) thinks that it represents about 80 per cent of furniture retailers covering some 90 per cent of turnover. The N.A.R.F. runs good educational schemes for middle management and furniture salesmen. Unfortunately few salesmen take advantage of these schemes (See Chapter VIII below).

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Some years ago the N.A.R.F. asked the manufacturers to state on invoices to retailers information about upholstery fabrics which would give details including fibre content, the result of wear tests, and care information. The B.F.M. felt unable to agree to this, but published the swing ticket referred to above giving advice on the care of upholstery. The label is not seen very frequently in the shops, partly, manufacturers say, because some retailers take it off. The N.A.R.F. object to the manufacturers' demand for all furniture to carry the name and address of the manufacturer.

Technical Development

The furniture trade benefits from the services of a number of organisations whose purpose is the promotion of sales, efficiency and technical development. The Furniture Development Council (F.D.C.) is the sole survivor of the Councils set up under the Industrial Organisation and Development Act, 1947. The Council's members are appointed by the Board of Trade, 7 each being drawn from manufacturers and trade unions, 3 being independent and one a retailer. Financed by a statutory levy on the turnover of each manufacturer, giving a total of not more than £75,000 a year, the F.D.C. acts as a kind of management consultancy to the industry. When asked, it will give advice on production control, scientific costing and other management techniques. It also holds conferences on the industry's problems in these fields. The F.D.C. provides up-to-date statistics on the economic position of the industry, publishing annual surveys and economic reviews.

The F.D.C. is closely connected with the Furniture Industry Research Association (F.I.R.A.), set up in 1961, to which the major part of this levy is passed. This contribution earns a grant from the Ministry of Technology on the basis of £60 for each £100 contributed by the industry up to a maximum grant of £60,000 a year. The Board of F.I.R.A. is in part elected by firms paying the F.D.C. levy with members appointed by the F.D.C. and all sides of the industry. Others may be co-opted. F.I.R.A. carried on and expanded the technical research programme previously developed by the Research and Information Committee of the Furniture Development Council. F.I.R.A. also provides a technical advice and information service for member firms. It recently opened a new research laboratory at Stevenage. Representatives of both F.D.C. and F.I.R.A. sit on technical committees of the British Standards Institution.

The most recent body to be established is the Furniture Promotion Council, set up in 1963 by some 60 manufacturers and retailers. The F.P.C. has sponsored a market research survey to find out what the public thinks about furniture as a prelude to a nation-wide advertising campaign that will promote furniture in general, as distinct from that of particular firms.

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Table 1

EXPENDITURE ON CONSUMER DURABLES

(as percentage of total consumer spending at current and 1958 prices)

	Total Consumer Expenditure (£m.)	All Durable Goods (Value at current prices)	Furniture and Floor Coverings		Motor Cars and Motor Cycles		Radio, Electrical and other Durable Goods	
			Value % (current prices)	Volume % (1958 prices)	Value % (current prices)	Volume % (1958 prices)	Value % (current prices)	Volume % (1958 prices)
1948	8,557	4.2	2.1	2.0	0.6	0.6	1.6	1.2
1949	8,913	4.7	2.4	2.4	0.7	0.7	1.6	1.3
1950	9,401	5.2	2.7	2.6	0.7	0.7	1.8	1.5
1951	10,154	5.5	2.7	2.5	0.7	0.7	2.0	1.6
1952	10,703	5.4	2.3	2.1	1.1	1.0	2.0	1.6
1953	11,404	6.3	2.4	2.3	1.6	1.6	2.2	1.9
1954	12,084	6.9	2.6	2.5	1.9	2.0	2.4	2.2
1955	13,019	7.2	2.3	2.2	2.4	2.4	2.6	2.4
1956	13,733	6.5	2.2	2.1	2.0	1.9	2.3	2.1
1957	14,483	6.9	2.3	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.5	2.3
1958	15,258	7.7	2.4	2.4	2.8	2.8	2.5	2.5
1959	16,037	8.6	2.6	2.6	3.2	3.3	2.9	3.0
1960	16,833	8.4	2.4	2.4	3.4	3.6	2.6	2.8
1961	17,699	7.8	2.4	2.4	2.8	3.1	2.5	2.7
1962	18,690	7.7	2.3	2.3	2.9	3.4	2.5	2.8
1963	19,730	8.0	2.3	2.2	3.2	4.3	2.5	3.0
1964	21,038	8.4	2.3	2.2	3.6	5.0	2.5	2.9

SOURCE: Furniture Development Council Statistical Digest for the Furniture Industry—December 1964.

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Table 2

NUMBER OF MANUFACTURING FIRMS AND TOTAL TURNOVER, 1950-1962

Year	Net. No. of Firms	At Market Prices £m.	1950 Prices £m.
1950	2,824	93.5	93.5
1954	2,321	115.4	109.5
1958	1,723	113.9	98.8
1959	1,671	131.2	113.9
1960	1,650	137.0	111.0
1961	1,625	134.2	112.1
1962	1,525	138.5	112.6

SOURCE: Furniture Development Council op. cit.

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Table 3

DISTRIBUTION OF MANUFACTURING FIRMS BY TURNOVER

Turnover Group £	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Under 1,000	20.9	21.1	20.5	17.5	16.2	14.9	14.4	14.2	15.0	14.6	14.9	13.6	12.3
1,000 —	33.3	31.1	32.1	31.8	29.3	28.0	28.7	29.1	29.2	28.7	26.4	26.4	27.0
10,000 —	28.5	28.2	28.1	28.9	28.3	28.3	28.5	29.5	30.2	28.3	29.9	30.1	30.4
50,000 —	8.6	9.9	8.9	9.4	11.2	12.3	11.9	11.9	10.8	11.5	10.9	11.1	11.9
100,000 —	7.9	8.9	9.5	10.8	12.8	14.6	14.5	13.1	12.6	14.2	15.1	15.9	15.4
500,000 —and over	0.8	0.9	0.9	1.3	2.1	2.0	2.0	2.2	2.2	2.7	2.8	2.8	3.0

SOURCE: Furniture Development Council, op. cit.

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Table 4

DISTRIBUTION OF MANUFACTURING TURNOVER BY FIRMS

Turnover Group £	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Under 1,000	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
1,000 —	3.8	3.1	2.9	2.6	1.9	1.6	1.6	1.9	1.9	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.3
10,000 —	18.5	15.7	15.4	13.9	11.0	9.6	9.6	10.5	11.0	8.8	8.8	8.5	8.3
50,000 —	16.0	15.7	13.1	12.3	11.8	11.5	11.8	12.1	11.1	10.2	9.0	8.8	9.3
100,000 —	39.5	40.6	41.8	41.4	38.3	40.4	40.6	38.3	37.1	37.1	38.0	40.1	37.1
500,000 — and over	22.0	24.7	26.6	29.7	37.0	36.7	36.3	37.1	38.8	42.3	42.7	41.3	44.0

SOURCE: Furniture Development Council, op. cit.

CHAPTER III

THE SURVEYS

Four surveys of consumer opinion have contributed to this study. First, an interview survey was conducted for the Council in certain areas of Reading and Stevenage by the Research Institute for Consumer Affairs. Secondly, a postal survey of local consumer group members was organised by the Council and analysed by the Research Institute for Consumer Affairs[1]. Thirdly, the questionnaire sent to consumer group members was also sent to members of the panel of the Women's Advisory Committee of the British Standards Institution. Finally, a number of questions about furniture were included in a general survey of shoppers' preferences and habits carried out for the Council by Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd.

The RICA Interview Survey

The RICA interview survey took place between July 15 and 29, 1964, and answers were obtained from the head of the household or his wife. The area chosen for the interview survey in Reading was the Southcote Council Estate of houses and flats built 10 to 12 years ago, many of which are now owner occupied, and some recent privately built houses surrounding it. At Stevenage, the survey was conducted in Chells Ward and Fairfields, areas recently developed; all the houses in the two areas were under 5 years old and most had been built by the Development Corporation. The localities were chosen to ensure that a sufficiently large proportion of the sample had bought furniture during the previous 12 months. They contain a large number of young married couples who were furnishing or had recently furnished their houses. We think that these communities are representative of similar communities throughout the country. The mix of occupation classes in the RICA interview sample broadly reflects the mix for England and Wales as shown in the 1951 census, apart from under-representation of the unskilled category. (Table 7). This under-representation is taken into account in the interpretation of the surveys. These surveys are based on normal statistical sampling techniques and the data derived from them are, therefore, applicable to the whole population in the groups they cover.

Table 5 shows how the random samples for the interview were determined.

[1] Consumer groups are voluntary associations of people who conduct surveys into local consumer matters.

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Table 5

THE SAMPLES

	Reading	Stevenage
Rateable units in chosen area	1900	2900
Rateable units used for pilot survey	56	77
Available for survey	1844	2823
Sampling ratio	4/5	1/3
No. drawn for sample	1475	941
Unable to contact	243	160
Refusals	60	28
Contacts	1172	753
Percentage of contacts buying furniture in last twelve months ...	21.5%	37.5%
Interviews	254	282
Rejected schedules	1	6
Schedules available for analysis	253	276

Of the total number of people contacted in both Reading and Stevenage just over one quarter had bought furniture during the previous twelve months. The interviews produced a total of 529 completed schedules that could be used in analysis.

The Postal Survey

The postal survey covered the whole country. 4,300 questionnaires were sent during July and August, 1964, to the members of 74 local consumer groups. By September, 1964, 906 completed questionnaires from people who had bought furniture in the previous 12 months had been returned, forming 21 per cent of the questionnaires originally posted to members. 883 of these were suitable for analysis. Their geographical distribution is shown in Table 6.

Table 6

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF POSTAL RESPONDENTS

Region[1]	Respondents	
	No.	%
London & S. Eastern	272	31
Northern, N. Western, E. & W. Riding	170	19
Eastern	166	19
Southern & S. Western	103	12
N. Midlands & Midlands	100	11
Scotland	23	3
N. Ireland	14	2
Wales	10	1
Unclassifiable	25	3
Total	883	101[2]

[1] Registrar General's Classification.

[2] Percentages add up to more than 100 per cent because of rounding.

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Differences Between the Samples

There were significant occupational and educational differences between the samples. In the RICA interview survey, half the informants fell into the skilled manual class and only 5 per cent into the professional category. In the postal survey, the position is reversed; 44 per cent of the respondents were in the professional category and only 5 per cent were skilled manual workers. The postal sample is not at all representative of the occupational distribution in England and Wales (Table 7).

Table 7

DISTRIBUTION BY OCCUPATIONAL CLASS

Occupational Class of Head of Household[1]	RICA		
	Interview survey	Postal survey	England & Wales (1951 census)
	%	%	%
I Professional	5	44	3.3
II Intermediate	13	37	14.5
III(a) Skilled, non-manual	13	10	53.0
III(b) Skilled, manual	50	5	
IV Semi-skilled	15	1	16.1
V Unskilled	2	0	13.1
Unclassified	3	2	

[1] Registrar General's Classification.

Well over half the informants in the RICA interview survey left school at 15 whereas over half of the postal respondents carried on full-time education after the age of 19 (Table 8).

Table 8

DISTRIBUTION BY TERMINAL EDUCATION AGE

Age at which head of household completed full-time education	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
19 or older	6	57
16 to 18 (inclusive)	23	29
15 or younger	68	13
Unclassifiable	3	1

Both samples were intentionally biased in favour of people under 45 years of age (Table 9). However the interview sample is probably broadly representative of furniture buyers as a whole. Old people buy less furniture and it can be reasonably assumed that lower income groups buy less new furniture than other categories of consumers.

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Table 9

DISTRIBUTION BY AGE

Age group Number in each age group (25-34=100)	RICA		England & Wales (1961 census)
	Interview survey	Postal survey	
25-34	100	100	100
35-44	71	103	108
45-54	36	51	111
55-64	8	23	93.5
65 and over	5	5	95.5

In the majority of cases in both samples, the informants came from families including a husband and wife with children (Table 10).

Table 10

FAMILY OF INFORMANTS

Family	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Husband and wife *with* children	78	68
Husband and wife *without* children	17	22
Living alone	2	6
Unclassifiable	3	4

In spite of the occupational and educational differences between people in the two surveys, their answers were closely comparable. Thus, these differences do not seem to be significant in interpreting furniture buying experiences. It has been argued that complaints about furniture arise in the main from the lower end of the trade so that low priced, low quality goods are the source of most complaints and dissatisfaction. If this is true, it may well be that our surveys underestimate the extent of dissatisfaction, since buyers of the cheapest furniture are under-represented in them.

The questionnaire for the postal sample was sent to 600 members of the panel of the Women's Advisory Committee of the B.S.I. and 260 replies were received (see Chapter V for an analysis of these).

Survey of Shopping Habits

The fourth contribution to the study came from a general survey of shoppers' preferences and habits conducted on behalf of the Consumer Council by Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd., which included questions about furniture buying. Interviews for this survey were taken in a national quota sample, representative of the population of Britain aged 16 and over, of 2,149 people. Fieldwork was done between August 13 and August 22, 1964.

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CHAPTER IV

WHAT THE CUSTOMER WANTS

Influences on Choice

Most people do not lightly decide on the choice of expensive household articles, and the choice of furniture is not an exception. Decisions on what to buy and where to buy it are often family decisions and many buyers shop around and "window shop" with their marriage partners before making up their minds (Table 11).

Table 11

SHOPPING ALONE OR WITH SOMEONE ELSE

Q. The last time you bought a larger household item did you go by yourself or did someone else go with you?

	Total	Men	Women	
			House-wives	Other
Sample — all those shopping for major household items	1,244	541	672	31
% total sample	58%	52%	68%	25%
	%	%	%	%
Self only	29	24	31	48
With husband/wife	66	74	61	19
With other adult (16 yrs. and over) ...	5	2	7	26
With children (15 yrs. and under)	3	1	4	7

Note: Percentages add up to more than 100 per cent because some shoppers mentioned more than one category.

SOURCE: Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd.

Choice of Shop

Large furniture shops and department stores enable shoppers to wander round and choose at their leisure so that they can reassure themselves that they have made the right choice, and this we think is one reason for their popularity with furniture buyers (Table 12).

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Table 12

TYPE OF SHOP VISITED

Q. When you are buying furniture, what kind of shop or shops do you visit, either to look around or buy at?

	Total	Men	Women	
			Housewives	Other
Sample — all mentioning type of shop[1] ...	1,850	864	915	71
% total sample	86%	84%	92%	57%
	%	%	%	%
Large furniture store	56	52	60	47
Large department store	50	48	51	51
Small furniture shop...	22	23	22	18
General chain store	7	8	6	5
Other	3	4	3	3

Note: Percentages add up to more than 100 per cent because some shoppers mentioned more than one type of shop.

[1] All shopping for furniture, including small items.

SOURCE: Social Survey (Gallup Poll) Ltd.

Over half of the furniture buyers in the RICA Interview survey tried more than one shop before they found what they wanted and 40 per cent of buyers went to three or more shops (Table 13).

Table 13

NUMBER OF SHOPS VISITED

Q. How many different shops did you go into before you found what you wanted?

Number of Shops visited	RICA Interview survey
	%
One	48
Two	11
Three or more	40
Don't know/can't remember	1
Number of buyers (=100%)	502

Table 13 may understate the extent to which people compare furniture in one shop with that in another for the questionnaire excludes "window shopping". When buyers were asked their reasons for buying at a particular shop, 60 per cent of the reasons given in the RICA interview survey and 47 per cent in the postal survey were that nothing could be found suitable elsewhere or that what they liked was in the window (Table 14).

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Table 14

REASON FOR CHOICE OF SHOP

Q. Why did you buy it at that particular shop?

Reasons given for choice of shop	RICA	
	Interview Survey	Postal Survey
	%	%
Nothing suitable elsewhere	35	29
Satisfied with previous purchase there	29	39
Saw what I liked in the window	25	18
Reasonable prices	20	31
Heard good reports of shop	18	16
Liked look of shop	12	15
Stocked make wanted	9	32
There was a sale on	9	14
Convenient to get to	3	23
Had an account there	6	15
Quick delivery	3	20
Knew salesman	9	3
Discount/dividends/good H.P. terms	6	*
Total reasons given	992	2073
Number of purchasers (—100%)	502	811

*less than ½ per cent.

Notes: Percentages total more than 100, because people gave more than one reason. All the answers in the interview survey were spontaneous; those above the dotted line were stated on the questionaire of the postal survey. The figures for the interview survey and the postal survey are therefore not directly comparable.

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Choice of Furniture

It is not surprising that by the time buyers walk into a shop to make a purchase a majority have already decided what they want to buy (Table 15).

Table 15

WHEN DECISION TO BUY IS TAKEN

Q. Do you make up your mind exactly what furniture to buy before going into the shop or are you undecided when you go in?

	Total	Men	Women	
			House-wives	Other
Sample — all those who buy furniture[1] ...	1,850	864	915	71
% total sample	86%	84%	92%	57%
	%	%	%	%
Mind made up beforehand...	67	56	66	75
Mind not made up	33	44	34	25
Total	100	100	100	100

[1] Including small items.

SOURCE: Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd.

When buyers were asked for their reasons for choosing a particular item by far the most people mentioned "design". The Council believes that buyers giving this reason were including all aspects of appearance: liking the look of it. This is the most important influence on choice and the overall impression is probably gained by the process of shopping around and 'window shopping' (Table 16).

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Table 16

REASON FOR CHOOSING

Reasons given	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Design (including all aspects of appearance)	80	88
Reasonable price	28	48
Same make bought previously	4	13
Advertisements	4	10
Heard good reports of it	3	10
Recommended by salesman	2	11
Seen in other homes	2	5
Magazines	1	3
British Standards Institution Kite mark	*	3
Right size	16	8
Well made	11	7
Comfortable	9	3
Easily cleaned	7	*
Convertible/versatile	6	1
Other reasons	6	6
Total reasons given	950	1,911
Number of purchasers (=100%)	529	883

* less than ½ per cent.

Notes: Percentages total more than 100, because people gave more than one reason. All answers in the interview survey were spontaneous; those above the dotted line were stated on the questionnaire of the postal survey. The figures for the interview survey and postal survey are therefore not directly comparable.

Table 16 indicates that price, although an important factor in consumer choice, is not the dominant factor. Retailers and manufacturers who sacrifice quality to cost saving may not be acting in their best interests.

The spontaneous replies of the interview survey in Table 16 support the argument that, while appearance is the decisive influence on choice in the shop, the customer is also seeking something that is well made, fits in with other furniture and is both comfortable and easily cleaned. In spontaneous replies these factors are rated next in importance to price, while no other factors are of any importance. These factors in choice were not included in the postal questionnaire and so the influence of advertising which was specified emerges more strongly than in the spontaneous replies.

What Consumers want to Find Out from the Shop

Table 15 shows that 33 per cent of buyers had not made up their minds before entering the shop. These respondents were then asked the following question.

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Table 17

INFORMATION WANTED FROM THE SHOP

Q. If undecided (on what to buy): What help or information did you hope to get from visiting the shop?

	Total	Men	Women	
			House-wives	Other
Sample — all seeking help or information from the shop	709	382	309	18*
% total sample	33%	37%	31%	14%
	%	%	%	%
Ranges of styles available	70	65	81	92
Price	58	62	52	42
Advice from assistant	33	30	39	21
Hire purchase terms	15	19	16	7
Delivery date	12	7	16	14
Other	3	3	3	—

* Small sample.

Note: Percentages add up to more than 100 per cent because some shoppers mention more than one kind of help or information.

SOURCE: Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd.

Range of styles available ranks above price and may be considered closely related to appearance as a factor in choice. Sales assistants do not seem to be a major source of help to consumers and can perhaps be regarded as a source of necessary information (as contrasted with advice), i.e. on price, hire purchase terms and delivery dates.

Types of Furniture Bought

More people in the RICA interview and postal samples had bought more upholstered furniture than any other type during the past year. Beds, other bedroom furniture and dining room furniture were roughly equal in being the next most popular types. Kitchen furniture and children's furniture were understandably not bought so frequently in both samples. Complete bedroom suites seemed to be unfashionable although they were twice as popular with people in the RICA interviews as with those in the postal survey (Table 18).

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Table 18

TYPE OF FURNITURE BOUGHT

Q. What piece of furniture did you buy most recently within the last 12 months?

Type of Furniture	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Complete bedroom suites	8	4
Beds only	13	15
Other bedroom furniture	12	13
Upholstered furniture	34	27
Other living room furniture	9	15
Dining room furniture	15	15
Kitchen furniture	5	7
Children's furniture	3	4
Number of purchasers (=100%)	529	883

Most people in both samples were buying furniture to add to their existing range, to set up their home, to provide for children or on moving house. Only a quarter of both samples were replacing existing pieces (Table 19).

Table 19

REASON FOR BUYING

Q. Why did you decide to buy it just then?

Reasons for Buying	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
As an addition	31	31
As a replacement	25	24
On removal	17	13
Needed for children	15	17
Setting up home	11	14
Number of purchasers (=100%)	529	863

Note: Answers were spontaneous in the interview survey but listed in the postal survey.

This low rate of replacement is supported by the Furniture Development Council's analysis of the buying patterns for three piece suites and bedroom suites referred to in Chapter II, which shows long average replacement periods.

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CHAPTER V

WHAT CONSUMERS COMPLAIN ABOUT

Over a quarter of the furniture buyers in the postal and RICA interview samples were dissatisfied with their furniture in some way or other. We do not know how many of these complaints were justified. Our object was to get an indication of the types of problem which made people feel dissatisfied with their purchases, rather than to identify those particular cases in which manufacturers and retailers were at fault.

Most of the dissatisfied people complained about the delivery service or the condition of the furniture when it was delivered. But a sizeable minority reported unsatisfactory wear within the first year (Table 20).

Table 20

DISSATISFACTION

Qs. Were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the furniture was delivered or its condition on delivery?
Have you been satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the furniture has stood up to use since the time you bought it?

Reasons for Dissatisfaction	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
DISSATISFIED:	%	%
In any way	27	30
With delivery or condition on delivery	19	24
With wear in the first 12 months	12(1)	9(2)
Number of purchasers (=100%)	529	883

Note: (1) For those who had bought their furniture 9 to 12 months ago, this figure was 18 per cent.

(2) These figures were very similar for the 46 per cent who asked the salesman to help them in choosing and for the 53 per cent who did not (see Table 30 Chapter VII).

The types of dissatisfaction in this chapter and the next two chapters are illustrated by examples taken from the letters sent to the Council in response to its Press appeal. By no means all the letters sent to us were complaining ones. Table 23 (a) shows that a substantial minority took the trouble to teg us about the good service they had received, as described in the followinI examples:

"The furniture arrived promptly and was very carefully packed so that it was in perfect condition and has remained so during the 18 months we have had it," and again:

"I am well satisfied with the furniture and if I had to buy any more I certainly know where to go."

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"Our choice made, the salesman quickly and efficiently arranged the details of payment and delivery, and the company duly complied with the delivery promise."

Damaged on Delivery

Superficial damage, probably occurring in transit, was the source of most complaints about the condition of the furniture on delivery. Few people reported actual breakages, although these can cause trouble out of all proportion to their incidence. Like the young lady, about to be married, who said in one of the letters that she was given a Christmas box by her mother to buy a piece of furniture for her new house. She bought a studio couch, which she stored unused in her mother's lounge, until she invited some friends to view it. "One of my friends just happened to sit on it and she was thrown over the top, the back leg having collapsed". On reporting the damage to the shop, she was told that the couch was to sit on, not to dance on.

One-third of the reasons for dissatisfaction on delivery given by people in the RICA interview survey and one-quarter in the postal survey related to scratching, marking and tearing. An example from one of the letters illustrates the range of damage that can occur to a batch of furniture between manufacturer and customer. "One chair had a splinter of wood out of an arm. On the other arm, there was the sort of impression you get when you take a hammer and hit the furniture with the claw end. On the other chair, there was a rip in the seat cover and on one of the stools there was a leg that had only half the varnish on it and that, too, was scratched. Wrapping on the furniture was limited to a polythene bag over each of the chair covers".

Another example shows the type of treatment valuable furniture can be given on its way to the customer. "The dining room suite arrived with no packing whatsoever—beautiful teak unprotected! There was snow on the ground and it was lifted from the van into the snow. The table was left outside (snow falling by now) while the two men struggled with the sideboard scratching it on a holly bush and knocking a piece out of the door with it. It finally arrived in our dining room wet and scratched." (Table 21.)

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Table 21

REASONS FOR DISSATISFACTION ON DELIVERY

Q. In what way were you dissatisfied with the way the furniture was delivered, or its condition on delivery? What was wrong?

Reasons for Dissatisfaction on Delivery	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Scratched, marked or torn	33	23
Delivery slow	11	25
Wrong or incomplete goods delivered	12	12
Poor workmanship	9	9
Parts badly fitting	5	11
Delivered on wrong day or at wrong time	11	8
Broken	6	4
Other reasons	13	8
Number of reasons for dissatisfaction (=100%)	134	298
Number of people dissatisfied on delivery	99	214

Note: In the interview survey the answers were spontaneous; in the postal survey the reasons were listed on the questionnaires.

Only a small number of the reasons for dissatisfaction on delivery in the RICA interview and postal samples related to poor workmanship and badly fitting parts (Table 21). These tend to show up more often in use, which may account for the fact that of the complaints in letters to the Council over one-fifth of the cases were about badly made furniture. These cases did, however, include a few where the poor workmanship was evident on delivery. A man found it impossible to sit on the chairs of a well-known branded suite without being pitched forward onto the floor. On being contacted, the manufacturers said that such a thing was impossible with their goods. And an example of badly fitting parts discovered just after delivery:—"My husband turned the table upside down to discover why the central flap was seizing up and two of the legs fell off. He has had to glue and pin the joints so that the table can be used" (see Table 21).

Delivery Service

Delay and inefficiency were the sources of dissatisfaction with the delivery service. The reason given most times in the postal survey for dissatisfaction about delivery was that the furniture took a long time to arrive, although the figure was much lower in the interview survey. (Table 21). Examples from the letters like the following are typical:—"The suite was ordered on November 11, 1963, with the promise of delivery in 3 to 4 weeks. After many telephone calls and being passed to various departments of the firm's head office, the suite finally arrived some 7 weeks from the date of order." Inefficiency in the delivery service can cause great anxiety particularly when one is moving into a new home:—"On the day before we moved into our new house, I called to ask for my furniture to be moved in. I was told that my dining room suite had been sold to someone else. I had to buy another which cost me £15 more."

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About a tenth of the reasons given in both surveys concerned the delivery of wrong or incomplete goods. One person who wrote to us said that besides being delivered one month later than promised, the dining room suite she received was not what she ordered. "Of the chairs, four out of six were of a different design to the ones ordered and a shelf was missing from the sideboard." Delivery of the wrong goods can be most frustrating when they do not fit the space provided for them. "When the (china) cabinet arrived it was not the one I had picked out at the sale, it was the larger type and would not fit into the recess. It was also in a very poor condition."

About one-tenth of the reasons given in the interview survey (less in the postal) were that furniture was delivered on the wrong day or at the wrong time (Table 21). "The suite arrived on a Tuesday and because there was no-one in they left it outside in the driveway. Luckily it did not rain", was typical. In some cases, the driver may rely on neighbours."We were told that delivery would be six to eight weeks and we gave them precise instructions to telephone us when the table arrived. Some twelve weeks later our neighbour brought the table in. It had been delivered while we were out for a short while. No attempt had been made to contact us prior to delivery."

Wear in the First Year of Use

Table 20 shows that 12 per cent of purchasers in the RICA interview survey (63 people) and 9 per cent in the RICA postal survey (79) were dissatisfied with the way their furniture stood up to use in the first 12 months. The causes of their dissatisfaction are summarised in Table 22.

Most of the dissatisfaction with wear during the first year of use related to upholstered furniture. Partly because upholstered items were the most frequently bought, and partly because upholstery is susceptible to wear, fading and staining.

Considerably more mentions of upholstery were made in the RICA interview survey than in the postal survey. Both surveys, however, put wear and fabric pulling above fading and staining as a source of dissatisfaction with upholstery in the first 12 months (Table 22).

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Table 22

REASONS FOR DISSATISFACTION IN USE

Q. In what way were you dissatisfied with the way the furniture has stood up to use since the time you bought it? What was wrong?

Reasons for Dissatisfaction in Use	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Upholstery worn or pulling	36	15
Upholstery fading or staining	9	6
Other complaints with upholstery	14	10
Total upholstery	58	31
Joints/fittings came loose or legs broke...	20	27
Marked, chipped or stained	12	21
Other reasons	10	21
Number of reasons for dissatisfaction (=100%)	93	105
Number of people dissatisfied with furniture in use	63	79

Note: In the interview survey, the answers were spontaneous; in the postal survey the alternatives were listed on the questionnaires.

Here are some typical examples, from our letters, of unsatisfactory wear. "Within weeks of buying a three-piece suite, it was looking scruffy, although my husband and myself are at business—no children . . . I think when you pay £60 you expect it to have a longer life." "In our considered opinion the upholstery material is only suitable for curtains—certainly not for chairs which have been bought to sit on" (£170 lounge suite). "After only two weeks of careful use, the covers began to look shabby and stretched. The interiors have worn, so that now instead of the front edges being blocked as they were originally, they are now all rounded" (£150 lounge suite).

An example of fading and staining. "I purchased a three-piece lounge suite in black and white uncut moquette and within a year the covering started to fade. The black dye went through the white and the button moulds on the settee rusted through the covering."

The postal survey showed a much greater dissatisfaction with faults other than upholstery wear, in particular joints and fittings coming loose and legs breaking. (See Table 22). "After having had a kitchen set for three days the beading came away from the table and I had already torn two tablecloths by the time I went back to the shop. Then a screw in one of the chairs worked loose and before I knew where I was I was on the floor badly bruised."

A substantial number of complaints (more in the postal survey) were made of marking, chipping and staining. For example, "Six months after buying a dining room suite, the sideboard showed severe signs of lacquer cracking down both sides."

Other types of unsatisfactory wear cover a whole range of discomforts difficult to classify like the following taken from the letters. "After a couple

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of weeks, the settee was most uncomfortable, and became impossible to sit on because it made the most alarming squeaking noises, also the backs of the chairs squeaked." Or they can be classified under any number of heads:— " . . . Then the suite started dropping to bits, the tacks all fell out, the material left the frames, the bottom fell out and I was heart broken."

Analysis of letters

The letters give a graphic description of the types of dissatisfaction coldly analysed in the surveys. Although without any accurate statistical basis, they broadly reflect the distribution of complaints in the surveys, apart from showing a large number of complaints about constructional defects (Tables 23 (a) and (b)).

Table 23(a)

ANALYSIS OF LETTERS BY CATEGORY OF FURNITURE

Type of Furniture	Experience analysed		Whether satisfied or dissatisfied in general with experience[1]	
	Number	Per cent	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
		%	%	%
Beds	99	11	22	78
Other bedroom	169	18	18	82
Upholstered	359	38	12	88
Other sitting/dining room ...	215	23	13	87
Kitchen	50	5	10	90
General	53	5	40	60
Total	945	100	16	84

[1] Percentages add up across the page.

Table 23(b)

ANALYSIS OF LETTERS—UNSATISFACTORY EXPERIENCES

794 shopping 'experiences' specified 1,577 items of complaint.

Type of complaint	Number	%
Bad service in shop	104	7
Construction defects	341	22
Chipped, scratched, marked	210	13
Upholstery worn, dingy, fading	198	12
Delivery		
Delays	189	12
Wrong goods or items missing, defective packaging	120	7
Action on dealing with complaints		
Slowness	56	4
Not satisfied with action	286	18
Other	73	5
Total	1,577	100

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Notes:

(*a*) Some 60 per cent of the complainants were assessed as middle class and 40 per cent as working class.

(*b*) 75 per cent of complainants went first to the retailer with their complaint.

(*c*) 40 per cent of furniture defects were noted on arrival of furniture, and 60 per cent subsequently.

(*d*) As a spot check, six people who wrote to us with constructional or upholstery complaints which appeared to be typical were visited by B.S.I. inspectors. In each case, the defects complained about were found to be present.

Women's Advisory Committee Survey

The Women's Advisory Committee of the British Standards Institution sent out 600 questionnaires for us, of which 260 were completed. 181 of these were suitable for detailed analysis, and reflected the trends apparent from the interview and postal surveys (Table 24 and see also Table 20).

Table 24

ANALYSIS OF FURNITURE BUYING EXPERIENCES REPORTED BY WOMEN'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Type of Furniture	Number of Experiences Analysed	Number Satisfied	Number Dissatisfied
Upholstered	46	31	15
Beds...	33	26	7
Other living room	30	24	6
Dining room	27	22	5
Other bedroom	19	16	3
Kitchen	13	9	4
Bedroom suites	12	6	6
Children's furniture	1	1	0
Total	181	135	46

In particular, the W.A.C. survey showed that the proportion (25 per cent) of people dissatisfied with their purchases was much the same as that in the RICA interview and postal surveys and that upholstered furniture was a source of much dissatisfaction, 33 per cent of the purchasers having cause for complaint.

Experiences of delay in dealing with complaints are dealt with in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER VI

HOW COMPLAINTS ARE HANDLED

The number of people making complaints to the supplier does not reflect the full extent of dissatisfaction with furniture bought. Only just over one-half of the dissatisfied people in the RICA interview survey and about two-thirds in the postal survey registered any complaint. Of those who did complain, the vast majority knew to whom to complain first—the shop (Table 25).

Table 25

TO WHOM THE COMPLAINT WAS MADE

Q. If you were dissatisfied in any way did you complain to the shop about your furniture?

	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Yes	50	58
No	33	24
Don't know/No answer	17	17
Number dissatisfied (=100%)	145	263

Over half of those who did not complain to the shop said that they did not like to or could not be bothered (Table 26).

Table 26

REASONS FOR NOT COMPLAINING TO THE SHOP

Q. Why didn't you complain to the shop?

	RICA	
Reasons for not complaining to shop	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Didn't like to or couldn't be bothered	52	58
Repaired it ourselves	4	18
Other reasons	44*	24*
Number not complaining (=100%)	48	66

* A great variety of reasons, none more than 4 per cent.

About one-fifth of the number complaining to the shop in both surveys were not at all satisfied, however, with the action taken by the shop (Table 27).

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Table 27

SATISFACTION WITH SHOP'S ACTION

Q. How satisfied were you with the action the shop took on your complaint?

Degree of Satisfaction	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Completely satisfied	51	47
Fairly satisfied	19	28
Not at all satisfied	21	19
Other answers	9	6
Number complaining to shop (=100%)	73	155

In the cases of both surveys, the main source of dissatisfaction was the length of time taken to deal with the complaint (Table 28).

Table 28

ATTITUDES TO SHOP'S ACTION

Q. In what way were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the action the shop took?

Reasons for Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Satisfied Attitudes		
Replaced goods without question	22	19
Other	34	35
Dissatisfied Attitudes		
Length of time to deal with complaint	21	23
Other	19	20
Don't know/can't remember	4	3
Number complaining to shop (=100%)	73	155

For example, one letter described a complaint which took 9 weeks to put right as follows: "We wrote a complaint about a divan and studio couch and a representative arrived three weeks later. After glancing at both items, he left with the promise that they would be replaced. Five weeks later a van arrived to take them away and I had a post card to say that they would be returning them a week later. To me this seems to be a very long time lapse between reporting the defects and repairing them to say nothing of the inconvenience caused."

On the credit side, in very few cases did the shop refuse to do anything about the complaint and in most cases the item was repaired, replaced or exchanged for a similar item. Nor was the complaint normally referred by the shop to the manufacturer, although in the case of the postal survey this did happen in 29 per cent of the cases (Table 29).

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Table 29

SHOP'S ACTION ON COMPLAINT

Q. What did the shop do about your complaints?

Action by shop	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Repaired item	41	27
Replaced item or exchanged for similar...	37	25
Referred complaint to manufacturer	18	29
Delivered item eventually	5	12
Other action	12	15
Refused to do anything	4	5
Number of details mentioned	86	179
Number complaining to shop (=100%)	73	155

Note: Percentages add up to more than 100, since some people gave more than one answer.

Reference to manufacturers can cause delay, breakdowns in communications between complainant, retailer and manufacturer, confusion as to who is responsible for dealing with the complaint and general muddle.

Take the following example of confusion leading to delay. "One rail in an armchair was found to be split. The retailer agreed to replace it and on August 9 it was collected. By September, I became a little annoyed at having one armchair missing and wrote to both retailer and manufacturer. The retailer replied on September 4 stating that they were awaiting delivery from the manufacturer and were making every effort to expedite it from them. By the same post, however, I heard that my chair had been delivered to the retailer on August 20. The manufacturer also pointed out that the retailer should not have removed the chair until a replacement had arrived. The retailer, after being informed of this, quickly produced a chair and offered their apologies."

The evidence of the surveys seems to show that the existing machinery for dealing with complaints operates adequately in the majority of instances. But this tentative conclusion needs modifying in a number of respects. Because of the small size of the sample, conclusions about the minority who complain cannot be based on highly accurate statistics. The one factor that does seem significant—delay—however, implies that the managements of retailers do not give priority to dealing with customers' complaints. They are, on the whole, quite capable technically of dealing with complaints but do not deal with them quickly enough.

Even if this delay could be cut down, with the existing volume of complaints, it is not at all clear that retailers would be capable of dealing with the dissatisfaction which does not, through apathy or timidity, lead to complaints. With increasing consumer education, people will be expressing their dissatisfaction and calling for swift action to put their complaints right.

One significant factor not recorded in the surveys, because whatever the size of the sample it would be statistically difficult to measure, is the proportion

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of complaints that reach deadlock given the present machinery and legal framework. The letters to the Council show that furniture can easily be a genuine source of disagreement between supplier and customer as to the justification for a complaint.

This applies particularly to upholstery where there can be endless wrangles over what is acceptable wear. The customer will argue that the fabric should not look worn out or faded after a certain period. The supplier will reply that if the customer had treated the fabric properly it would not have shown wear so quickly. *e.g.* "In our opinion the suite was an expensive one and should have given the service one expects having paid a comparatively high price; now that the firm refuses to do anything about the wear, we are reduced to having arm caps so that it will not continue to deteriorate and look shabbier still." "They (the retailer) grumbled at us, saying we were to blame for the wear as they had had no complaints. I told them that it was because they sold to people who didn't use their lounge much, in fact keep it as a museum, with a notice saying 'don't sit on these chairs'. I use my lounge constantly, I said, and you should make the chairs and settees for sitting on and taking a lot of wear." As these examples show, satisfactory wear is so much a matter of opinion.

The Retail Trading-Standards Association, a body that helps to raise the standards of retail service to consumers, carries out regular performance tests. It recently tested 263 complaints about furniture upholstery and found that only 38 per cent of them were valid. The tests were based on objective criteria of wear.

There does seem to be a need for an independent arbitration body to which complaints can be referred in cases of dispute.

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CHAPTER VII

THE QUALITY OF ADVICE AND INFORMATION

A key point at which a large amount of dissatisfaction could be avoided is the point of sale. If the information and advice given by the salesman to the customer on the furniture he is about to buy are accurate and comprehensive a large number of subsequent pitfalls arising from misunderstandings, poor care, and wrong usage can be avoided. However, well over half the purchasers in the RICA interview survey did not ask the salesman for any help in choosing what to buy (Table 30).

Table 30

DID CONSUMERS ASK THE SALESMAN FOR HELP?

Q. Did you ask the salesman to give you any help in choosing what to buy?

Asked salesman	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
Yes	31	46
No	69	53
Don't know/can't remember	—	1
Number of purchasers (=100%)	502	811

So, a large number of consumers must take a share of the blame when things go wrong.

The fortunes of those who do ask the salesman's advice may, however, be little better than those who do not. Note 2 to Table 20 shows that similar percentages of those who asked for advice and of those who did not, expressed dissatisfaction with wear in the first 12 months.

"At M . . ., there was an imposing list of makes of furniture stocked. I wandered round for some time—no assistant in sight. Eventually I found one, explained my requirements and asked what were the various makes. I was told 'We don't label them, madam,' and 'Nobody really wants big chairs'."
"I selected a combination of bookcase compartments from the manufacturers' catalogue and went along to the local stockists to see a sample of the units I had chosen, none of which they were able to show me. I also had about four queries on points that were not clear from the catalogue (which was generally helpful and informative). None of these questions could be answered and the furniture salesman plainly knew less about the goods than I who had just read the catalogue."

A majority of the purchasers in the RICA interview and postal surveys who asked for help were given by the salesman a choice of prices, styles, sizes and woods or finishes (Tables 31 and 32).

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Table 31

CHOICE OF PRICE, STYLE, SIZE

Q. If you asked the salesman for help in choosing what to buy, did he offer you a choice of (*a*) Price, (*b*) Style, (*c*) Size ?

	RICA					
	Interview survey			Postal survey		
	Yes	No	No Answer	Yes	No	No Answer
Choice of:	%	%	%	%	%	%
Price	79	18	3	79	6	15
Style	72	21	7	80	6	14
Size	60	29	11	57	11	32
Number asking for help (=100%)	153			376		

N.B. Percentages add up across the page.

Table 32

CHOICE OF WOODS OR FINISHES

Q. Did the salesman offer you a choice of woods or finishes?

	RICA					
	Interview survey			Postal survey		
	Yes	No	No Answer	Yes	No	No Answer
Choice of:	%	%	%	%	%	%
Woods or finish	54	26	20	59	9	32
Number asking for help (=100%)	153			376		

Note: These answers applied to all types of furniture.

But on aspects equally if not more vital to subsequent satisfaction—quality of fabrics and fabric patterns—only a minority said that they were given any choice (Table 33).

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Table 33

CHOICE OF QUALITIES AND FABRICS

Q. Did the salesman offer you a choice of (*a*) quality of upholstery fabrics, (*b*) different fabric patterns?

	RICA					
	Interview survey			Postal survey		
	Yes	No	Other[1]	Yes	No	Other[1]
Choice of:	%	%	%	%	%	%
Quality of fabric	33	20	48	41	6	53
Fabric patterns	39	18	43	43	7	50
Number asking for help (=100%)	153			376		

[1] No answer or not applicable.

For purchasers of tables, desks, sideboards or dressing tables, only one-fifth in the RICA interview survey and one-quarter in the postal survey were told by the salesman whether the furniture was heat proof. And slightly fewer were told whether it was stain proof (Table 34).

Table 34

INFORMATION ON HEAT AND STAIN PROOFING

Q. Did the salesman give you any information on whether the surface was (*a*) heat proof, (*b*) stain proof?

	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
Information given:	%	%
Heat proof	21	24
Stain proof	17	22
Number of purchasers (=100%)	205	290

Note: Question applied only to purchases of any form of table, desk, sideboard or dressing table.

On the key questions of looking after and cleaning the furniture, only a little over a quarter of the purchasers in the RICA interview survey and one-fifth of those in the postal survey were given any advice. Nearly half of the purchasers in both surveys would have liked some advice if it had been available (Table 35).

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Table 35

CARE AND CLEANING ADVICE

Q. Did the salesman give you any advice on how to look after and clean the furniture, or was there a label giving instructions for this?

	RICA			
	Interview survey		Postal survey	
	Given Advice	Not Given Advice But would have liked some	Given Advice	Not Given Advice But would have liked some
Percentage	27	42	21	46
Total Number of Purchasers (=100%)	502	355	811	617

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CHAPTER VIII

LABELLING AND SALESMAN TRAINING

There are two solutions to the problem of improving the quality of advice and information at the point of sale—more informative labels and salesmen whose product knowledge is good. When he is deciding which piece of furniture to buy, the customer wants information about the product to enable him to find something which will suit his need. He also wants to know how to keep the furniture in good condition so that it can continue to fulfil the purpose for which he bought it.

The first purpose can be served by a label which tells him the degree of heat and stain resistance of his sideboard or, of an upholstered chair, what the fabric is, what it is filled with, and the dimensions. Few manufacturers or retailers provide labels with this type of information and if such a label is provided by the manufacturer it may be removed by the retailer to prevent it spoiling the look of a shop display. In fact, over one-fifth of the purchasers in RICA interview and postal surveys said that the furniture was not labelled with even the price (Table 36).

Table 36

LABELLED WITH PRICE?

Q. Were all or most of the pieces of furniture in the showroom labelled with their prices, and was a manufacturer's written guarantee provided?

	RICA			
	Interview survey		Postal Survey	
	Labelled with price	Guarantee provided	Labelled with price	Guarantee provided
Percentage	78	34	77	Not asked
Total purchasers (=100%) ...	502		811	

The Consumer Council has already launched its voluntary labelling scheme. This scheme, in which manufacturers are co-operating with the Consumer Council on a voluntary basis, means that within the next year informative labels will be appearing upon selected consumer goods in the shops. These labels will give shoppers information about the product they are buying which will help them to decide whether it is best suited to their needs. The consumer is having a decisive voice in the discussions about what should appear on the labels. The details will be tailored to each article, but will be concerned with safety features, performance and construction, as appropriate. In the case of furniture it should be intelligible and helpful to all people buying furniture.

The Consumer Council hopes that the furniture industry will be one of the first to co-operate in the scheme. From the industry's viewpoint there is much

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in favour of informative labelling. Many of the customer complaints at present arise because people have bought the wrong type of furniture for their needs, or misused what they have bought. Informative labels would help to reduce the volume of these complaints. There should, therefore, be more satisfied customers and less criticism of the trade.

With a scheme which offers undoubted advantages to the trade, both in customer goodwill and in sales potential, and to the customer, it is to be hoped that retailers will not be tempted to remove labels before sale.

Instructions on how to look after the furniture are also not favoured by retailers and tend to be removed or hidden away. The British Furniture Manufacturers' Federated Associations run a care labelling scheme which, unfortunately, is not widely used. The Consumer Council would like to see this more widely adopted. Moreover, there are a number of fabrics in use for upholstery for which there are, apparently, no suitable cleaning preparations.

Under the Council's labelling scheme, if consumers think it important that a type of furniture should carry information on care, the fixing of permanent care labels will be a condition of entry into the scheme.

If, in addition to adequate labels on the furniture, the salesman is able to supplement and elaborate the information contained on the labels, customers should achieve a higher degree of success in buying furniture to suit their needs. But at present only a small number of salesmen have sufficient knowledge to give the buyer all the information he needs.

There are a number of educational courses for furniture salesmen. The National Association of Retail Furnishers organises a National Furnishing Diploma Course, which is available at a few technical colleges and can be done by correspondence. N.A.R.F. also collaborates with the London College for the Distributive Trades in a full-time course, which mainly attracts the sons of proprietors of independent furniture shops who wish to take up a career in the furniture trade. The Retail Trades Education Council (R.T.E.C.) organise a three-tier structure of courses in retail distribution which includes the furniture trade. The chief element of this is the National Retail Distribution Certificate, the furniture and furnishings commodity section of which is identical with Part A of the National Furnishing Diploma. The Council of Industrial Design started in 1964 to organise courses for retailers and their staff to help them understand how furniture is made and the materials used. In addition, the R.T.E.C. operate a free advisory service on internal schemes of staff training for retailers. Only a handful of furniture shops, however, have taken advantage of this service.

At present, only a small proportion of the sales force in the trade go on training courses for a number of reasons. First, some retail managements are reluctant to allow their staff time off for day release because of staff shortages and the lack of immediate returns. Secondly, some young people are reluctant to undergo training especially if it entails night classes. Thirdly, many retail managements do not run their own staff training schemes or encourage their staff to take the training courses that are available elsewhere.

While existing training facilities are more than sufficient to meet present demand in most areas, in a few areas where demand is concentrated more accommodation is needed. But training facilities would probably not be adequate if there were a big increase in the training of retail staff.

There is also a dearth of continuation courses, which enable trained staff to keep up with progress in design, new materials, methods of manufacture

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and retailing techniques. Up-to-date product knowledge is essential to the salesman if he is going to be of any value to the customer.

These comments do not take into account any effect which the Industrial Training Act, 1964 may have on the skills of workers in the furniture manufacturing industry or of assistants in furniture shops or departments. Appropriate Industrial Training Boards have not yet been set up and it will, in any case, take some time for their influence to become apparent.

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CHAPTER IX

AVOIDING MISHAPS BETWEEN SHOP AND CUSTOMER

An informative label, a care label and a well-trained sales assistant may be of no avail. The salesman's expertise may not be drawn upon. The chosen furniture may take a long time to arrive at the customer's home. When it does arrive, it may be delivered on the wrong day or at the wrong time. It may be the wrong piece and it may be damaged.

Shopping Habits

Shopping for furniture is made more difficult by shoppers' habits which, to some extent, are affected by existing restrictions on shop hours. The Gallup Poll survey showed that when shoppers stated a particular day for a shopping expedition to buy larger items a large majority named Saturday (Table 37). Some shoppers mentioned more than one day, but this was statistically insignificant. Men were more likely to name Saturday than housewives. This tends to support the view that shopping for larger household items is popular on a Saturday mainly because husbands and wives like to shop together when large items of expenditure are involved (see Table 11, Chapter IV). A majority of respondents naming a time of the day for shopping for these items mentioned 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., although many shop in the morning (Table 38). This concentration of buying and "shopping around" at certain times means that the salesman's knowledge may not be fully used because he does not have sufficient time to devote to a customer.

This position might be helped if shops stayed open later on other days of the week. This may be hindered by local closing orders. Otherwise, under the present law, shops can stay open until 8 p.m. every night (except early closing day) and until 9 p.m. on one night. Many people might welcome the opportunity to do their shopping for furniture at greater leisure in the evening instead of on Saturdays, but this would, of course, depend on whether husbands and wives could shop together at this time. In any case people are not likely to make a special journey to town for such evening shopping unless all the main shops are also open.

Delivery Delays

Complaints about the delivery service in the surveys broke down into long lapses of time between purchase and delivery, delivery on the wrong day or time, and delivery of the wrong piece. Long time lapses between purchase and delivery generally arise because the item wanted is not in the shop and must be ordered from the manufacturer. One third of the purchasers in the RICA interview survey and nearly one half of those in the postal survey said that the piece they wanted had to be ordered (Table 39).

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Table 37

SHOPPING FOR LARGER HOUSEHOLD ITEMS—DAYS OF THE WEEK

Q. On what day of the week do you buy, or look around the shops for these items?

	Total	Men	Women	
			House-wives	Other
Sample — all who buy larger household items	1,244	541	672	31
% of total sample	58%	53%	66%	25%
Day of week:	%	%	%	%
Monday	3	2	4	3
Tuesday	3	1	4	3
Wednesday	3	2	3	3
Thursday	4	3	4	3
Friday	5	6	5	3
Saturday	46	56	38	39
Sunday	*	*	*	*
No particular day	38	31	42	48

Note: Figures add up to more than 100 per cent because some people gave more than one day.

* Less than one per cent.

SOURCE: Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd.

The furniture wanted may not be in stock for three main reasons. First, upholstered furniture can be supplied in a wide range of coloured fabrics and styles. The retailer will not be able to stock the whole range available. Customers must then be prepared for several weeks' delay while their requirements are obtained.

Secondly, retailers do not carry extensive stocks of any one variety of furniture because of the difficulty of storing it economically and in a way that does not cause damage. However large the stocks carried, there would never be enough to satisfy everybody. Furniture is bulky in relation to its value and cannot be stacked easily. If retailers carried larger stocks, the price to the customer would probably increase. Finally, demand for furniture tends to reach a peak in the autumn and the spring. A model may be displayed at the Manchester and London furniture shows, and a number of orders placed for it with no chance of its even being brought into production for some time. At these times, manufacturers' order books build up and delivery periods for some popular lines can, we have been told, be as long as one year. The absence of large stock cushions leads to average delays of between 6 and 7 weeks in delivery when the piece is not in the shop.

The consumer, of course, would like to see every effort possible made to cut down these inevitable delays. However, given the existing structure of the industry, it will be difficult for the trade to reduce the delays without possibly affecting price or quality. The consumer, though he would like earlier delivery, will nevertheless not complain so long as he is told truthfully at the time of purchase when he can expect delivery. But the existence of this delay lays

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him open to a number of possible mishaps. At the time of purchase, the salesman may, in his eagerness to make a sale, be too optimistic about the date of delivery. It can also happen that due to technical delays at the factory —mechanical breakdowns, operatives off sick, delays in receiving fabric and raw material supplies—the normal delivery times cannot be met. These can all lead to unexpected delays to the customer, who may then be out when the furniture finally arrives. In these cases the consumer has every right to insist that the retailer should tell him of any change in the expected date and time of delivery.

The retailer should also notify the customer if the piece of furniture ordered cannot be supplied. A number of complaints relate to the delivery of the wrong goods and this is not always the result of inefficiency on the part of the retailer. The manufacturer may not be tooled up for the item in question or he may not be able to supply the shade and design of fabric required for an upholstered item. He should not in this case supply an item similar to the one ordered without getting the retailer to ask his customer if he approves of the change.

An answer to delays in delivery might be central warehousing. This has been shown by some furniture supermarkets and multiple furniture stores to work very well, since they can sell a certain range of items from stock or deliver them within a few days. It would, however, mean a considerable limitation in the range of types available, and there might be a danger of a decline in quality. Warehousing is not spreading because the furniture trade is dominated by relatively small independent retailers. To be economic, it would seem to require a number of furniture retailers to join together to set up a central warehouse and competition has so far prevented this.

Damage in Transit

Furniture is bulky, uneven in shape and awkward to handle. It is thus particularly vulnerable to marking, scratching and chipping while it is being moved from supplier to customer. There are in most cases two journeys involved—from manufacturer to retailer and from retailer to customer. In each case, the furniture will be man-handled on and off a lorry. If it is badly wrapped, it can easily be damaged during these operations. Once on a lorry it may be insecurely loaded and the movement during the journey can cause it to be marked by surrounding furniture. Projecting legs and arms are also vulnerable, especially if the furniture has to suffer a lot of handling and congested storing in the shop.

Four ways of reducing this source of dissatisfaction suggest themselves. First, veneers and lacquers for non-upholstered goods and parts that are resistant to marking and scratching can be developed. F.I.R.A., in fact, is doing research into these. Upholstery is being made more resistant to tearing and scratching, but it will always remain vulnerable, although a good deal of damage, soiling in particular, could be prevented by the wider use of protective wrappings, perhaps plastic, for the journey. Secondly, the wrappings for the journey need to be effectively applied. A greater use of cartoning would be effective but it is favoured neither by manufacturers nor by retailers because it is expensive in materials, in labour and in space. Manufacturers feel that it is more economic for them to repair furniture damaged in transit than to prevent the damage by expensive packaging.

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A third possible solution is more thorough going than the others for it attacks the problem at the design stage. Knock-down furniture, where the furniture is delivered in its component parts and is assembled in the house of the customer, can be handled easily and is by nature less vulnerable to marking because it can be stacked safely. It is also a solution to the problem of keeping larger stocks, since the units can be more easily stacked than ordinary furniture.

Unfortunately, like cartoning, it is not favoured by manufacturers or retailers. The trade generally evidently takes the view that K.D. furniture would not only require a complete reorganisation of factories but would also increase prices. They say that customers do not like it as the article is not as rigid as a carcase-made product. The fact that the retailer would have to employ skilled men to assemble the units would further increase costs. They say it would also limit the design.

On the other hand, it seems to the Consumer Council that there are opportunities for savings, notably in finishing, storage and transport costs. Experience on the continent of Europe suggests that there would be a wider market for K.D. furniture than is at present admitted by the British industry. There were, furthermore, some interesting K.D. designs at the 1965 Interfurn Exhibition in London. The Council thinks that these considerations make a strong case for F.I.R.A. to investigate the possibilities of K.D. furniture.

Table 38

SHOPPING FOR LARGER HOUSEHOLD ITEMS—TIME OF DAY

Q. At what time of day did you go ?

	Total	Men	Women	
			House wives	Other
Sample — all who buy larger household items	1,244	541	672	31
% of total sample	58%	53%	66%	25%
Time of Day:	%	%	%	%
Up to 12 noon	35	38	33	19
Lunchtime, 12 noon—2 p.m.	9	7	10	19
2 p.m.—4 p.m.	52	44	57	55
4 p.m.—7 p.m.	15	16	14	6
After 7 p.m.	*	*	*	*
No particular time	8	9	7	16

Note: Figures add up to more than 100 per cent because some people gave more than one time.

* Less than one per cent.

SOURCE: Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd.

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Table 39

IN STOCK OR NOT?

Q. Was it delivered from stock or did they have to order it for you?

Availability	RICA	
	Interview survey	Postal survey
	%	%
From stock	64	53
Had to order it	33	44
Other answers	3	3
Number of purchases (=100%)	502	811

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CHAPTER X

THE CONSUMER'S RESPONSIBILITY

The improvements referred to in the last four chapters require action by manufacturers and retailers. If they are to be successful in securing a lasting improvement in the service provided by the trade to its customers, a corresponding positive effort to improve his understanding of the furniture he buys is required of the customer.

At present, the consumer must bear a certain amount of responsibility for the poor service he may experience. Many consumers are ignorant of the kind of wear they can expect from, or the treatment they can give to, furniture and this is not entirely due to a dearth of labels, or the salesman's lack of knowledge. As the surveys proved, a substantial number of furniture buyers do not ask the salesman for any assistance in buying furniture. This is often because they are ignorant of the right questions to ask. They are ignorant of the range of qualities of furniture available and the prices that go with them.

Besides making himself aware of the range of qualities available, price differentials and performances, the consumer, if he is to be entirely satisfied with his purchase, should also be design conscious. The surveys showed that "design" is the main influence on the decision to buy. This is clearly, in the main, not a conception of design based on aesthetic and functional principles. It is just a feeling that the chair appeals in some undefined sense and will fit in with the customer's scheme of interior furnishing and decoration.

The customer must learn to prevent his desire to buy a piece for its look from influencing his judgment on its fitness for the purpose for which it is intended. He may also be beguiled by immediate visual impact into buying a piece that he becomes heartily sick of after a short period.

The furniture industry has been criticised for not leading public taste and so preventing design-conscious buyers from finding the furniture they would like. However, the fact that there is a certain amount of shoddy, unfunctional and ugly furniture on sale is not entirely the fault of the furniture industry. If consumers were more discriminating in the fields of design, quality and construction, there would be less incentive to produce furniture of this kind.

It is in the field of consumer education, which promotes this discrimination, that the Consumer Council has a positive role to play. The Council is publishing a series of booklets on intelligent buying and the second of these will contain advice on how to buy furniture. The Consumer Council also hopes that the industry, in its efforts to brighten the image of furniture, will lay emphasis on educating the consumer in what to look out for when he buys furniture. It is not greater knowledge of brand and makers' names that is needed so much as the meaning of these in terms of quality and performance.

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CONCLUSIONS

- On delays in delivery and damage in transit, there is a need for manufacturers and retailers to discuss together the extent of the problems and to examine objectively the practical objections to central warehousing, to holding larger stocks, to cartoning and to knock-down furniture, and to do everything in their power to overcome these objections.
- F.I.R.A. should give priority in its research programme to the development of more resistant finishing materials and improved K.D. systems.
- The time taken to deal with complaints should be reduced, in particular by the retailer attending to them immediately. Where the furniture has to go back to the manufacturer, there should be efficient liaison between manufacturer and retailer to avoid confusion. The consumer should be promptly informed of any change in delivery arrangements.
- Provision should be made for independent expert assessment of the validity of complaints in cases of dispute.
- Labels describing qualities and performance and labels on how to look after the furniture should be more widely adopted. It is hoped that the furniture industry will co-operate in the Consumer Council's informative labelling scheme.
- Salesman training should be taken seriously by the whole retail trade. More firms should have internal training schemes and the courses available should be more widely utilised. Continuation training should also be more widely practised.
- B.S.I. technical committees are working on the revision of B.S.1960 (the standard on domestic furniture constructed mainly of wood) and B.S. 2543 (woven upholstery fabrics). A fully representative B.S.I. technical committee has come out in favour of a new British Standard for furniture fittings *e.g.* hinges and locks. It is hoped that all these new and revised standards will be widely adopted by the industry.
- The British Furniture Manufacturers' Federated Associations might consider launching a campaign to make the industry standard and quality control conscious.
- More flexible shop opening hours should be adopted by retailers with the object of reducing the load on salesmen on Saturdays, so that more time and attention can be given on that day to customers' requirements.
- Education of consumers in what to look for when buying furniture and what to ask the salesman should be pursued both by the trade and by the Consumer Council.

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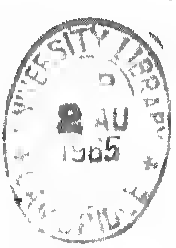

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